

## 19

## Fichte's Original Insight Reviewed

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### Abstract

This paper addresses Fichte's puzzle of self-consciousness. I propose a new reading of "Fichte's original insight", inspired by Pareyson's general reading, which I call here the "Fichtean metaphysical turn in transcendental philosophy". Against the mainstream view in Fichte's scholarship, I argue that Fichte's and Kant's views do not concur regarding the primary reference of the "I", namely *spontaneous agency in thinking*, which Fichte calls "*Tathandlung*". Yet, their views do in fact concur when Fichte claims that this spontaneous agency in thinking is the "essence" or the underlying nature of the self, which Kant denies. Regarding this I take the side of Fichte. But how is Fichte's original insight supposed to solve the puzzle of self-consciousness? At that transcendental level, the puzzle does not arise because there is no need for self-identification in the first place. Transcendental self-knowledge results from *the sui generis* intellectual *Selbstanschauung* that everyone has of oneself as sheer spontaneous agency in thinking. But at the empirical level, the puzzle does not arise either and for the same reason. Reference to the embodied self dispenses with any self-identification because it is based on the fundamental metaphysical relation everybody has to their own body, namely identity.

### Keywords

self-consciousness – Fichte's puzzle – Heidelberg school – language-analytical approach  
■ keywords not capitalized, ok?

### 1 Prolegomena

In 1966 Henrich published in the commemorative volume for Wolfgang Cramer a paper with the suggestive title "Fichte's Original Insight."<sup>1</sup> The focus was the

<sup>1</sup> Henrich, Dieter. *Fichtes ursprüngliches Einsicht*. Frankfurt a. M. 1966.  
■ add period?

structure of self-consciousness. According to Henrich's reading of Fichte, self-consciousness cannot be understood as turn-back-upon-oneself consciousness "Sichzurückwenden". That is what a very long tradition (called "Reflection") thought, dating back to Ockham and continuing through Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, until Kant and his followers.

Knowing self-reference seems to require the knowledge of identity that the subject as the thinker is the subject as her own object. Now, this presupposed knowledge launches either a regress or a vicious circle. Fichte's well-known solution recurs to the idea of I as "self-positing". Yet, assuming that the self is a *res* or a substance, Fichte's proposal faces an immediate objection: "how could someone perform that very act of positing if it does not yet exist in the first place"?

The phenomenon of reflexive or knowing self-reference appears to be so embarrassing to the members of the Heidelberg school that some of them despaired of ever solving it. Henrich describes the phenomenon of reflexive self-consciousness as a "puzzle" and as an "enigma",<sup>2</sup> and characterizes the philosophical attempt to explain the phenomenon as completely "helpless." Cramer, another key figure in the Heidelberg school, remarks that the phenomenon of self-consciousness confronts us with "an incontestable state of affairs" whose explanation leads to difficulties that "appear close to insurmountable".<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Pothast describes the main difficulty of reflexive self-reference as "insoluble".<sup>4</sup> The overall conclusion to which they seem to be driven is that the traditional philosophical concern should shift its focus from the phenomenon of reflexive or knowing self-reference to the phenomenon of pre-reflexive awareness "*Bekanntsein mit sich*".<sup>5</sup>

In the late seventies, Tugendhat claimed that the problem lurking behind the Theory of Reflection is what he, inspired by Heidegger,<sup>6</sup> called the subject-object model, that is, the underlying assumption that one becomes conscious of something insofar as one represents "*Vorstellen*" and identifies it as an object, i.e., as something placed against one's act of reflection.<sup>7</sup> The diagnosis seems correct, but the same cannot be said of the proposed solution. Tugendhat

2 Henrich, Dieter, *Fichtes ursprüngliches*, p. 65.

3 Cramer, Krammer. "Erlebnis." In: H. Gadamer, *Stuttgarter Hegel Tage*. Bonn 1974, p. 54.

4 Pothast, Ulrich. *Über einige Fragen der Selbstbeziehung*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1974.

5 Heinrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliches*, pp. 277–278.

6 Heidegger, Martin. *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Frankfurt a. Main 1989.

7 Tugendhat, Ernst. *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung Sprachanalytische Interpretationen*. Frankfurt am Main: 1979.

believed that he could solve or dissolve the puzzle by just replacing the subject-object model with a new linguistic framework. Yet, Tugendhat's semantic account faces the same problem again; or so I shall argue.

This paper addresses Fichte's puzzle of self-consciousness. I propose a new reading of "Fichte's original insight", inspired by Pareyson's general reading, which we may call here the "Fichtean metaphysical turn in transcendental philosophy". Yet, against that mainstream view in Fichte's scholarship, I argue first that Fichte's and Kant's views do not concur regarding the primary reference of the "I", namely *spontaneous agency in thinking*, which Fichte calls "*Tathandlung*". Nonetheless, their views do in fact concur when Fichte claims that this *spontaneous agency in thinking* is the "essence" or the underlying nature of the self, which Kant as is known denies. Regarding this I take the side of Fichte. Even though Fichte's metaphysical insight does not settle the fundamental metaphysical mind-body debate (whether the self is material or immaterial), I believe that a close examination of the nature of the cogito supports Fichte's original insight.

But how is Fichte's original insight supposed to solve the puzzle of self-consciousness? At that transcendental level, the puzzle does not arise because there is no need for self-identification in the first place. Transcendental self-knowledge results from the *sui generis* intellectual *Selbstanschauung* that everyone has of oneself *as agency in thinking*. But at the empirical level, the puzzle does not arise either and for the same reason. Reference to the embodied self dispenses with any self-identification because it is based on the fundamental metaphysical relation everybody has to their own body, namely identity.

In the face of my overall claims, the reader readily realizes that this paper is not only situated in history of philosophy. It is also mainly conceived as a paper of a systematic nature, attempting to provide a solution to a problem (Fichte's puzzle) that transcends the Fichte-Kant historical debate, reaching both German contemporary philosophy and contemporary analytical philosophy of mind. Regarding this, beside Fichte's scholars (The mainly Italian reception of Fichte's work), I will recur to authors and contributions stemming from all different philosophical traditions: transcendental philosophy, the Heidelberg school, phenomenology and the analytical traditions.

Given this, this paper is structured as follows. As the debate around Fichte's puzzle of emerges in German contemporary philosophy with Henrich's seminal paper,<sup>8</sup> in the next section I contextualize it, by presenting it in the recent history of German philosophy. Then I present it in possibly the most reliable way.

8 Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliches Einsicht*. I have named my paper after Hentich's.

However, the debate was not confined to the Heidelberg school. Tugendhat resumed the debate in his quite popular paper in Germany about self-consciousness at the end of the seventies.<sup>9</sup> That said, in the subsequent two sections, I present and criticize, respectively, Tugendhat's linguistic-analytical approach (*sprachanalytische Behandlung*).

In the fourth, entitled "Roads not taken", I rule out two contemporary solutions to the original puzzle: the phenomenological proposal of an intransitive or pre-reflexive form of self-consciousness and Bermúdez's suggestion of primitive forms of putative nonconceptual self-consciousness or self-awareness.

In the last section I present and defend my proposal at length. This last section is conceived as follows. First, I resume Fichte and Kant's debate on the underlying nature of self-consciousness in the tradition of transcendental philosophy. That is required for clarifying Fichte's view on self-consciousness, more specifically Fichte's obscure ideas of "self-positing" and of "Tatahandlung". After that, I present and defend my reading of Fichte's original insight in two steps as a plausible solution to the puzzle.

## 2 The Heidelberg School

Henrich was right when he drew attention to the fact that Fichte was the first philosopher of the tradition to recognize a paradox in the account of self-consciousness by means of the Theory of Reflection.<sup>10</sup> Knowing self-reference requires the knowledge that it is the object of the reflection that is at the same time the very reflecting subject, that is, the one who is performing the act of reflection. Fichte sums up the paradox as follows:

We become (...) conscious of our consciousness of our consciousness only by making the latter a second time into an object; thereby obtaining consciousness of our consciousness, and so on ad infinitum. In this way, however, our consciousness is not explained, or there is consequently no consciousness at all, if one assumes it to be a state of mind or an object and thus always presupposes a subject, but never finds it. The sophistry lies at the heart of all systems hitherto, including the Kantian.<sup>11</sup>

Henrich reformulates Fichte's puzzle in the following terms:

<sup>9</sup> Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*.

<sup>10</sup> Henrich: *Fichtes ursprüngliches*, p. 14, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Fichte, Johan G. *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. GWL Jena und Leipzig 1794/95. Quoted from Peter Heath (translator). In Fichte: *Science of Knowledge (Wis-*

It is not difficult to see that the reflection theory is circular: if we assume that reflection is an activity performed by a subject – and this assumption is hard to avoid – it is clear that reflections presuppose an “I” that is capable of initiating activity spontaneously, for the “I” as a kind of quasi-act cannot become aware of its reflection only after the fact. It must perform the reflection and be conscious of what it does at the same time as it does it.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Cramer certainly formulated the problem most clearly:

But how can the subject know the she in the reflection has herself as her own object? Apparently, only through the fact that the ego knows that she is identical with herself as her own object. Now, it is impossible to attribute this knowledge to reflection and to justify knowledge from it. Because for every act of reflection it is presupposed that I am already acquainted with myself, to know that the one with whom she is acquainted, when it takes herself as object, is identical to the one who is making the act of reflection turn back on itself. The theory, which wants to make the origin of self-consciousness understandable, therefore ends necessarily in a circle: that knowledge already must presuppose what it wants to explain it in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

Fichte’s puzzle is this: knowing self-reference requires knowledge of the identity between the subject *as the thinker* (“Is”) and the subject *as the object* (“Io”), the thinker as the subject and object at the same time, hence the apparently paradoxical Fichtean proposition: “Ich=Ich”. The puzzle can be more clearly reconstructed in the form of a classic dilemma. The first arm of the dilemma is the infinite regress. The question is: how do I know that I am the object (of my own reflection)? The answer is: by knowing that I am the one who carried out the act of reflection in the first place. But the same question is raised all over again: how do I know that I am the subject who carried out the first-order reflection? (How do I know that I am the producer of the relevant token of the first-person pronoun)? For that, I need to perform another second-order reflection in order to identify myself as the subject who carried out the first-order reflection and so on *ad infinitum*.

*senschaftslehre*), ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970; 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, II, p. 356.

12 Henrich, Dieter, “Self-consciousness, a critical introduction to a theory.” *Man and World* 4 (1970, 1), p. 11.

13 Cramer, “Erlebnis”, p. 56.

The other arm of the dilemma is the vicious circle. If I want to avoid the undesirable vicious infinite regress, I have to assume that I somehow know in advance that I am the same subject who is the object of reflection by knowing, and at the same time, *and by the same token of the first-person pronoun*, that I am the subject that has carried out the act of first-order reflection (without the need to carry out a second-order reflection). However, if I already know that I am the subject carrying out the act of reflection (the one producing a token of the first-person pronoun), as Fichte says, the knowing self-reference is not explained by the Theory of Reflection but rather it is presupposed.

Fichte's own solution to this problem is unclear, but very well known:

The "I" posits itself absolutely, that is, without any mediation. It is at the same time subject and object. The "I" only comes into being through its self-positing – it is not a preexisting substance – rather, its essence in positing is to posit itself, it is one and the same thing; consequently, it is immediately conscious of itself.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Fichte never explained his metaphor of positing and self-positing.<sup>15</sup> The formula "the 'I' posits itself" can negatively characterize Fichte's own rejection of the traditional Theory of Reflection. However, according to the Heidelberg school, the idea of "self-positing" sounds incomprehensible. Pothast, for example, wonders: "how could someone perform that very act of positing if it does not yet exist in the first place?"<sup>16</sup>

The Heidelberg theory of consciousness emerged in 1971 as an attempt to resume Fichte's original insight. Negatively, it can be characterized by the rejection of both the old Theory of Reflection and Fichte's claim that self-consciousness is as "*Tathandlung*". Positively, it can be seen as the resumption of Fichte's original insight that self-consciousness must be based on a non-propositional knowledge of oneself, which Henrich calls self-acquaintance.

The core of the old Heidelberg theory of consciousness can be represented in three main theses. (1) Reflexive knowing self-reference cannot be accounted for in the terms suggested by the Theory of Reflection without circularity. (2) To break the circle, self-consciousness must be accounted for on the basis of an original form of self-acquaintance within consciousness. (3) However, this original form of self-acquaintance is neither an activity nor a relation between a subject and her object.

<sup>14</sup> Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, p. 357.

<sup>15</sup> Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliches*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Pothast, *Über einige Fragen der Selbstbeziehung*, p. 71.

### 3 Tugendhat's Linguistic-Analytical Approach

Inspired by both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Tugendhat claims that Fichte's puzzle arises only because self-consciousness is misconceived in the traditional terms of the subject-object model of consciousness. To be sure, I become aware of this computer by means of some intentional act of representing it as an object. Still, I do not become conscious of myself by means of some act of representing me as an object. He summarizes his criticism of the traditional view of reflexive self-reference in the following terms:

The problem with the theory of reflection that Henrich identifies (...) rest on the assumption that we are analyzing something whose essence consists in the identity of knowing and what is known. For someone who does not acknowledge that the phenomenon of self-consciousness has or presupposes this structure, the difficulty does not exist. The difficulty, which is in fact insoluble, is only an outcome of the absurdity of the basic approach.<sup>17</sup>

In Tugendhat's view, the problem of the theory of reflection traces back to the subject-object model. The puzzle only emerges because self-consciousness is misconceived as the alleged relation of identification between "I" *as the representing subject*, and me *as the represented object*, that results from a self-representation. In other words, the background assumption is that one becomes conscious of oneself by self-identifying oneself as the object of one's own intentional act of representing. In this regard, Tugendhat is quite right.

Yet, Tugendhat's solution involves a methodological re-orientation toward language:

One asks oneself whether this problem disappears – or at least can be solved in any case – under the language-analytical view of epistemic self-consciousness, understood as that view that proceeds from the assumption that epistemic self-consciousness manifests itself in language, instead of relying on inner awareness.<sup>18</sup>

Tugendhat's "*sprachanalytische Bhandlung*" is characterized by two closely connected tenets. The first – the negative one – is his rejection of the subject-

<sup>17</sup> Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, p. 54.

object model; the second – the positive one – is his linguistic reduction of the reflexive self-reference linguistic phenomenon to the mode of employment of psychological I-sentences in which one takes a self-ascription of a mental predicate such as “M”. So the understanding of reflexive or knowing self-reference relies on the understanding of the mode of use of the first-person pronoun and on the mode of employing mental predicates.

As the ultimate reference point, the first-person pronoun doesn't identify or pick myself out as one among other individuals in some domain. The lurking question is why. Wittgenstein and Anscombe notwithstanding, Tugendhat holds that the first-person pronoun does refer to my person as someone identifiable from the third-person perspective. Given this, any “I” sentence does express a genuine proposition rather than a mere avowal “*Äusserung*.” On this basis, Tugendhat states what he calls the semantic *principle of veridical symmetry* between first-person and third-person psychological sentences: “*The sentence (Satz) “IM” is true, if uttered by me, iff the sentence “He M” is true if uttered by someone else who by “he” means me “mich meint.”*”<sup>19</sup> According to Tugendhat, what ensures the veridical symmetry is the reasonable assumption that the indexicals “I” and “he” involved co-refer. When one refers to oneself by means of the first-person pronoun and when someone else (or the person himself) refers to himself by means of the third-person pronoun, *one and the same proposition is being expressed*:

1. He (Ernst) feels pain.  
■ hyphens replaced by periods, ok?  
 And what Ernst says or thinks
2. I (Ernst) feel pain.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, the simple co-reference of the indexicals involved is necessary but certainly not enough for the veridical symmetry. Tugendhat overlooks a key assumption. It is also necessary that we take a coarse-grained Russellian proposition as the appropriate model for the content of 1 and 2, in this case a sequence consisting of ⟨Ernst; Pain⟩.

Now, although one and the same Russellian proposition is being expressed by 1 and 2, ⟨Ernst; Pain⟩, only by thinking 2 does Ernst know without identification that he self-refers. In opposition to 2, Ernst's or someone else's knowledge

19 Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, p. 75.

20 According to Tugendhat: “With indexical expressions, however, someone can mean a third person with ‘he’. But if he means me (mich meint), as stated in the principle just mentioned, then it is necessary that whom he means with ‘he’ be the same whom I mean with ‘I’.” Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, p. 75.  
■ German quotation marks replaced by English quotation marks, ok?  
■ non-matching quotation marks  
■ German quotation marks replaced by English quotation marks, ok?



of the truth of 1 is based either on the observation of Ernst's behavior (when the thinker of 2 is someone else) or, in some cases, on inferences. In this way, the principle of veridical symmetry requires that the content expressed by 1 and 2 is modeled by Russellian propositions.

Be that as it may. One thing we know for sure is that Tugendhat's principle of veridical symmetry is what guarantees the communicative exchange when the speakers of 1 and 2 are different persons under different circumstances.

#### 4 The Puzzle Returns

But if the immediate knowledge of oneself as the owner of mental states is negatively described as not based on observations, inferences, and on alleged inner perception, Tugendhat owes us a positive explanation of it. Following Wittgenstein and Shoemaker, Tugendhat holds that psychological first-person sentences are immune to a peculiar error of reference when employed in conformance to the rule. So if Ernst knows the rule of employment of the first-person pronoun (according to which that pronoun refers to whoever employs a token of it), by employing a token of it, Ernst couldn't possibly fail to recognize that he is referring to himself whenever he thinks 2.

Yet, Tugendhat's equation of immediate epistemic self-consciousness and the employment of psychological I-sentences in conformity to its rule raises several questions. First, what guarantees the immediate self-knowledge of the content expressed by 2 is certainly not the Russellian proposition consisting of the sequence ⟨Ernst; Pain⟩, but rather the mastering of the token-reflexive rule of employment of the first-personal pronoun. Given this, the appropriate model for capturing the immediate self-knowledge expressed by the content of 2 is some Fregean proposition consisting of the peculiar mode of presentation of Ernst's expressed rule of employment of "I", roughly: 3-The individual employing a token of 2 (Ernst) is in pain. The meaningful employment of 3 relies on what Bermúdez has called the token-reflexive rule of the employment of the first-person pronoun: 4- If a person employs a token of 'I', then he refers to himself in virtue of being the producer of that token.<sup>21</sup>

Let us assume just for the sake of argument that Ernst is on the street when he calls his mom to complain about his pain. Since his mother is not at home, the answering machine is automatically activated and Ernst utters sentence 2,

<sup>21</sup> Bermúdez, José L. *The paradox of self-consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT Press 1998. p. 15.

recording it on the answering machine. Time goes by and Ernst's pain is over and he forgets about it. He then returns home and checks the messages on the answering machine. However, when he listens to the messages from the answering machine, Ernst does not recognize his own voice. What conclusion can we draw from this simple case? First, Ernst must assent to the content of sentence 3 (what he listens to when he hears the messages from the answering machine), provided he only masters the semantic of the rule of employment of the first-person pronoun in 4. Yet, at the same time, he can deny the content of 2, modeled as a Russellian proposition, even though the contents of 2 and 3 are veritatively symmetrical. Even worse, as Ernst does not recognize his own voice on the answering machine, even when he assents to 3, he is not knowingly or reflexively self-referring. Reflexive self-reference requires the identify between the employer of the first-personal pronoun with himself.

The problem is as Ernst was not born knowing of rule 4, how did he come to master it if he was not already self-conscious in the first place? Interestingly, Henrich gives this reply to Tugendhat's criticism by claiming: "if we understand the word ('I') as an indexical word, the problem is eliminated";<sup>22</sup> that is, the problem is presupposed rather than solved and we are back at Fichte's puzzle. But Tugendhat never took Henrich's reply seriously because he never understood the real nature of Fichte's puzzle.<sup>23</sup>

The following conclusions are imposing. To be sure, Tugendhat is right when he claims that self-consciousness cannot rely on the traditional subject-object model. Nobody becomes self-conscious by *identifying* oneself as the object of his own intentional act. Still, to appeal to the token-reflexive rule 4 *presupposes* rather than solves the problem because in the token-reflexive rule 4 self-identity is presupposed rather than explained. We are back at Fichte's "circularity": the employment of tokens of the "I" presupposes reflexive or knowing self-reference rather than explaining it. Tugendhat's greatest mistake was to assume the original puzzle was linguistic rather than cognitive.

## 5 Roads Not Taken

The common idea of the Heidelberg school and of phenomenology is that before reflexive or knowing self-reference by means of mastering the token-reflexive rule of the first-person pronoun the individual is "already somehow

<sup>22</sup> Henrich, "Self-consciousness, a critical introduction to a theory," p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the seventies, Tugendhat was a Wittgensteinian who believed that great philosophical puzzles only take place because we do not pay attention to ordinary language.

acquainted with himself.” That sounds right to me. The question is: how to provide a positive meaning for this claim? In this section I mention roads I believe that we should not take.

1. In his famous book,<sup>24</sup> Bermúdez believes that the only solution to this traditional puzzle is the postulation of primitive nonconceptual forms of self-consciousness.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, I believe that a primitive nonlinguistic form of self-consciousness is necessary, but I do not see why this nonlinguistic self-consciousness must be at the same time nonconceptual. Bermúdez rightly rejects what he calls *The Conceptual Requirement Principle*, making room for the possibility of nonconceptual contents: The Conceptual Requirement Principle: The range of contents that one may attribute to a creature is directly determined by the concepts that the creature possesses.<sup>26</sup>

However, he is still closed to the linguistic turn when he accepts the priority principle: The Priority Principle: Conceptual abilities are constitutively linked with linguistic abilities in such a way that conceptual abilities cannot be possessed by nonlinguistic creatures.<sup>27</sup>

On the phylogenetic scale, genuinely perceptual systems appear in animal species well before belief and propositional attitudes appear. Bees, frogs, pigeons, goldfish, and octopi are, I assume, good examples. Although they lack propositional attitudes, they have visual perceptual systems. The perceptual systems of some of these animals have been thoroughly studied. Scientific explanations of the discriminations, computations, and informational functions of the perceptual systems of lower animals commonly individuate the representational content of visual states partly in terms of properties and relations in the animals’ environment, properties and relations to which the animals bear causal relations – both in sensory reception and in activity. In fact, the best explanations of some of these low-level representational systems attribute perceptions of physical objects in space, and of rudimentary spatial features of and among such objects. For example, computations in the visual system of bees that bear on locating a hive operate on parameters that represent spatial positions and objects in those positions.

Yet, there are overwhelming data supporting the assumption that primates and other higher mammals have propositional attitudes-beliefs, conceptual-

24 Bermúdez, *The paradox*, p. 41.

25 I have criticized Bermúdez’s idea of a nonconceptual form of self-consciousness in a number of papers xxx.

26 See Bermúdez, *The paradox* 1998, p. 41.

27 See Bermúdez, *The paradox*, p. 42. It is noteworthy that Tugendhat and almost all Wittgensteinians endorse this *priority principle*.

ized wants, and intentions – as well as perceptions. Having beliefs requires having a capacity for inference-for truth- and reason-preserving propositional transitions among propositional attitudes, transitions that are attributable, as activity, to the whole animal. Simple logical, inductive, and means-end inferences are present in the mental activity of higher non-human animals.

Moreover, I also assume that primates and other higher mammals that are known to have propositional attitudes-beliefs also have self-notions. A prey cannot think that a predator is coming towards it unless it has a self-notion. Of course, the possession of a self-notion does not mean that the creature knowingly self-refers because without communication there is no need for self-reference in the first place. Thus, I do not see any compelling reason to assume that pre-linguistic infants that are about to learn token-reflexive rule 4 do not possess a self-notion or a self-concept. Against Bermudez, I assume that the hypothesis of possession of a primitive nonlinguistic self-notion is the inference-to-the-best-explanation for mastering token-reflexive rule 4.

2. As a way out of the dilemma, the phenomenologist postulates a pre-reflexive, intransitive form of access to oneself. In such primary self-disclosure, one doesn't take oneself *as an object* either of one's own inner perceptions or of one's own thoughts. According to Sartre, for example, it is only the necessity of syntax that compels us to say that we are aware *of* our experiences or *of* ourselves. The basic claim is that one's experiences and thoughts rely upon a peripheral awareness of oneself. When Sartre focuses his attention on some cigarettes (his example), at the same time that he becomes transitively aware that they are twelve in number, he is also pre-reflexively aware that he is counting them.<sup>28</sup> There is no infinite regress since, according to Sartre, "*there is an immediate, noncognitive relation of the self to itself*".<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, even if the postulation of a pre-reflexive or intransitive form of self-consciousness avoids the traditional puzzle because there is no need for identification, that is no solution to our problem insofar as the reflexive self-reference (i.e., the fully-fledged self-consciousness) is still understood in all phenomenological traditions as the result of a self-identification (the subject-object model). Sartre is quite explicit on this point: "[*Reflection*] is an operation of the second degree ... performed by an [act of] consciousness directed upon consciousness, a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object".<sup>30</sup> So, if Sartre is pre-reflexively aware that he is counting (without taking himself as an object)

28 Sartre, Jean P. *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Quoted from Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick's translation. New York: Hill and Wang 1956, p. liii.

29 Sartre, *The Transcendence*, p. 12.

30 Sartre, *The Transcendence*, p. 44.

while he sees some cigarettes, he could only become reflexively conscious of himself by counting when he takes and identifies himself as the object of a second degree consciousness. We are back at the regress.

The rational core of Tugendhat's criticism is his rejection of the traditional subject-object model of self-consciousness. Yet, Tugendhat overlooks that, if self-consciousness does not result from a self-*identification*, it certainly relies on the self-*identity* as the most fundamental metaphysical relation that each of us bear to ourselves, namely identity. Thus, we are back at the question of how to make sense of the intuitive idea that we are acquainted with ourselves before we knowingly self-refer by means of the "I".

## 6 My Proposal

Let me recap. As we saw, neither the Heidelberg school nor Tugendhat's language-analytical approach provides a reasonable answer to Fichte's puzzle of self-consciousness for the reasons I have presented. Moreover, Bermúdez's recent suggestion of primitive forms nonconceptual self-consciousness or Sartre's idea of an intransitive or pre-reflexive self-consciousness have little to recommend. So, we are back to Fichte's obscure ideas of "self-positing" and of "Tathandlung". How should we understand them? To clarify what Fichte had in mind I need to step back and consider Fichte's criticism on Kant's view on self-consciousness. My first step toward a solution of the traditional puzzle is to address the following question: when Fichte criticizes Kant's view on self-consciousness as one of those belonging to philosophical systems, which presupposes rather than accounts for knowing self-reference, what does Fichte have in mind? This question naturally invites another: wherein lies the difference between Fichte's and Kant's views on self-consciousness.<sup>31</sup> Let me start with the second question. Regarding this Ivaldo comments:

In this philosophy (Fichte's), the problem of knowledge is raised from the cognitive-theoretical plane to the ontological plane, that is, from the plane of the analysis of the relations between subject and object to the plane of the foundations of such relations, foundations that are, together, principles of theoretical or practical reason.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the original context of the emergency of Fichte's philosophy, see D'Alfonso, Matteo Vincenzo; De Pascale, Carla; Fuchs, Erich & Ivaldo, Marco (eds.) 2016. *Fichte Und Seine Zeit: Kontext, Konfrontationen, Rezeptionen*. Brill | Rodopi.

<sup>32</sup> Ivaldo, "Doutrina da Ciência e Filosofia Transcendental: Fichte em face de Kant", *Revista*

In the same vein, Ausmuth claims:

Fichte's philosophy is subordinated to the primacy of the practical, of life, of the whole of man. A mere reconstruction of the structural elements of the representation [Vorstellung] in the return [Rückgang] to its conditions of possibility would not only be insufficient for Fichte, but it would also not fulfill the task of philosophy. For, according to Fichte, philosophy should not be mainly: – an abstract intellectualism or an intellectualized rationalism.<sup>33</sup>

Bertinetto calls this "Fichte's performative ontology":

Critical metaphysics and performative ontology express, in Fichte, the same transcendental position: being, or what appears as being, must be understood beforehand as an effort, as becoming and, as Fichte says from 1800, as life.<sup>34</sup>

Ivaldo's, Ausmuth's, and Bertinetto's reading traces back to Pareyson's, the first to call attention to what I want to call here "Fichte's metaphysical turn in transcendental philosophy".<sup>35</sup> The idea is quite clear from both quotes: Fichte replaces Kant's problem of knowledge with the metaphysical problem of foundation, turning Kant's main original focus on theoretical to practical reason. The question is: wherein lies Fichte's metaphysical turn when we consider the question of self-consciousness? Regarding this Ivaldo claims:

He maintains that it is not the fact of consciousness, but an original act of the self (**Tathandlung**), that is the principle of philosophy. The synthesis between subject and object given in the representation is valid as a determination of empirical consciousness and therefore belongs to the theoretical-cognitive domain of philosophy. But the synthesis pre-

*de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte*, 5 | 2012, pp. 3–4. My translation, emphasis added. Regarding this, see also Ivaldo 1999, 2005; Ausmuth 2009.

33 Ausmuth, C., "Eu e ser [Sein]. A imagem de Deus e o mundo construído." *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte*, 19 | 2019, p. 4. My translation. See also Ausmuth 2000.

34 Bertinetto, "A ontologia performativa de Fichte." *Aurora*, Curitiba, 2015, p. 802. My translation.

35 Pareyson, *Fichte. Il sistema della libertà*, 2nd edition, Milan: Mursia, 1976. Regarding this, see Ausmuth, C.: "Przełom "transcendentalny w filozofii Kanta. Przegląd Filozoficzny" – Nowa Seria 52 (4):77–86. Regarding the reception of Fichte's philosophy in Italy, see Ivaldo 1995, 2001, 2010.

supposes a thesis, **the fact presupposes an act, the representative consciousness requires a transcendental foundation of itself**, which Fichte found in an original activity of the self, which on the one hand does not fall into the representation and which, on the other hand, makes possible the subject-object relationship and, therefore, the entire system of consciousness.<sup>36</sup>

We find the same idea in Bertinetto: “The I must be understood as a genetic performance (i.e., as Tathandlung) that practically develops as effort, image, or even as a phenomenon of life and as life.”<sup>37</sup>

The idea is that Fichte’s metaphysical turn led him to replace the putative Kantian fact of consciousness with the original act of the self. Still according to Bertinetto:

He (Fichte) carries out an epistemological revision of Kant’s thinking on apperception, by means of establishing the priority of the analytic unity over the synthetic unity and changing the formulation notoriously used by Kant for the explanation of apperception. On the other hand, Fichte’s work consists in grounding apperception ontologically.<sup>38</sup>

Bertinetto’s idea is that it is not possible to understand how the manifold of given representations is united in an organized and coherent way unless we assume that the identical self (analytical unity of consciousness) what grounds the unity of the given manifold of representations (synthetic unity of consciousness) by genetically performing this very unity of the manifold. Given this, the so-called analytical unity of self-consciousness (the identical self) is the genetic or performative ground of the synthetic unity of conscious and not the way around as Kant claimed.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, according to the mainstream in Fichte’s scholarship, Fichte and Kant are in opposite camps regarding the question is self-consciousness for epistemological reasons, but above all for ontological, metaphysical and ontological

36 Ausmuth, “Eu e ser [Sein]. A imagem de Deus e o mundo construído.” *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte*, 19 | 2019, p. 4. My translation.

37 Bertinetto: “A ontologia performativa de Fichte.” *Aurora*, Curitiba, 2015, p. 802. My translation. In 2012, Bertinetto, A., “L’appercezione trascendentale nell’ultimo sistema berlinese di Fichte.” *Annuario Filosofico* 28:325–340 2012.

38 Bertinetto, A., “L’appercezione trascendentale nell’ultimo sistema berlinese di Fichte,” *Annuario Filosofico* 28, p. 325.

39 Bertinetto, A., “L’appercezione trascendentale nell’ultimo sistema berlinese di Fichte.” *Annuario Filosofico* 28, p. 329.

reasons. I disagree, at least in part. If their views on self-consciousness concur regarding the *ontological status* of self-consciousness, namely about the ultimate nature or essence of self-consciousness, they are in full agreement about a key feature of the metaphysics of self-consciousness: as a matter of fact neither for Fichte, but not for Kant either, self-consciousness is a given *fact*, but rather *spontaneous activity in thinking*, or so I shall argue below.

Be that as it may. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Fichte and Kant are in opposite camps regarding the question is self-consciousness. Following Henrich, I believe that the key passage of A108 is the one that best illustrates their different views:<sup>40</sup>

Thus the original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself is at the same time a consciousness of an equally necessary unity of the synthesis of all appearances in accordance with concepts, i.e., in accordance with the rules that not only make them necessarily reproducible, but also thereby determine an object for their intuition, i.e., the concept of something in which they are necessarily connected; **for the mind could not possibly think of the identity of itself in the manifoldness of its representations, and indeed think this a priori, if it did not have before its eyes the identity of its action**, which subjects all synthesis of apprehension (which is empirical) to a transcendental unity, and first makes possible their connection in accordance with a priori rules. (A108, emphasis added)

Based on the metaphysical turn in transcendental philosophy, the quote may be read as if Kant was assuming that the self-conscious mind has an a priori awareness of its own identity prior to the action of synthesis, prior to its *Tathandlung* as if Kant has overlooked what Ausmuth, Bertinetto et al call genetic or performative character of self-consciousness. Regarding this, first, Kant is supposedly *presupposing* the identity of the self as a thinking being and the self as the object of thought rather than accounting for it. Second, Kant is overlooking the genetic or performative character of self-consciousness. But is that what Kant in fact has in mind? A careful reading of one quote clearly indicates that this is not the case. In the quote Kant claims that the identity of the mind is dependent on “its action” of subjecting the synthesis. The awareness of the self’s identity is dependent on an “action” of unification of representations that the “self” performs.

<sup>40</sup> Henrich, *Identität und Objektivität: Eine Untersuchung über Kants transzendente Deduktion* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1976), p. 64.



Interestingly, Tugendhat dismisses Kant's theory of transcendental self-consciousness as "obscure".<sup>41</sup> But several of Kant's scholars have adopted his semantic analyses of psychological I- $\varphi$  sentences as the best model for Kant's transcendental self-consciousness just to avoid the Fichtean puzzle. The underlying assumption was that both Fichte and the Heidelberg school misunderstood Kant by assuming that self-consciousness for Kant is a self-relation, best modeled by the traditional subject-object framework. Indeed, by all accounts Tugendhat's semantic model seemed to be far more attractive. So, the Kantian "I think" that must be able to accompany all my representations is best couched by Tugendhat's view of self-consciousness as "immediate epistemic self-reference" in terms of: "I know that I  $\varphi$ " (where " $\varphi$ " stands for a predicate describing a generic conscious state).<sup>42</sup>

Was that correct? If Tugendhat's analytical-linguistic approach does not solve Fichte's puzzle, his "immediate epistemic self-consciousness" does not work as an appropriate model for Kant's transcendental self-consciousness either. But why is that so? Well, in both his transcendental deduction and in his Paralogisms, Kant left no doubt that the "I think" of transcendental self-consciousness refers to *no entity whatsoever* (material or immaterial). Rather, the "I think" refers to spontaneous agency in thinking. Therefore, all occurrences, the first-personal pronouns "I" and "me" and possessives "my" and "mine", do not designate in Kant conscious states of a person. Given this, Fichte and Kant are not in opposite camps when what is at stake is the primary reference of the first-person pronoun "I". Both agree that the first-person pronoun "I" primarily refers to *spontaneous agency in thinking*, which Fichte calls *Tathandlung*.<sup>43</sup> If such an assumption is not in accordance with the semantic analysis of the common use of the first person pronoun that Tugendhat proposes, so much the worse for the semantic analysis.

Now, if Kant's and Fichte's views on self-consciousness are in agreement about the reference of "I", the lurking question is where their views concur.

41 Tugendhat, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstbestimmung*, p. 52.

42 Cramer 1990.

43 Regarding this, Fichte misunderstood Kant's position, at least according to Ivaldo's reading: "Until Kant, in Fichte's opinion, the absolute was understood as a thing, mere objectivity in itself. In an analogous – and unilateral – view of the absolute, those commentators or Kant's continuers who claim to want to start from the self (and not the thing) fail, by objectifying the self and conceiving it as consciousness in itself" "Doutrina da Ciência e Filosofia Transcendental: Fichte em face de Kant", *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte*, 5 | 2012, p. 5. The translation is mine. As a matter of fact, Kant has always criticized attempts at objectifying self-consciousness.

Let me first consider Kant's account of empirical self-knowledge in his B-Deduction:

The **I think** expresses the act of determining my existence. The existence is thereby already given, but the way in which I am to determine it, i.e., the manifold that I am to posit in myself as belonging to it, is not yet thereby given. For that self-intuition is required, which is grounded in an a priori given form, i.e., time, which is sensible and belongs to the receptivity of the determinable. Now I do not have yet another self-intuition, which would give the determining in me, of the spontaneity of which alone I am conscious, even before the act of **determination**, in the same way as time gives that which is to be determined, thus I cannot determine my existence as that of a self-active being, rather I merely represent the spontaneity of my thought, i.e., of the determining, and my existence always remains only sensibly determinable, i.e., determinable as the existence of an appearance. Yet this spontaneity is the reason I call myself an **intelligence**.<sup>44</sup>

According to Kant, self-knowledge depends on self-determination of the inner sense by the spontaneous act of transcendental thinking. By contrast, Fichte seems to assume an intuitive evidence of "I" in any spontaneous act of thinking, which Fichte's employment of the term *intellectual "Selbstanschauung"* seems to indicate:

I am active in representing; if this is intuited as it is, this intuition would be intellectual. Pure self-awareness is intellectual intuition, **that is, it is certainty of activity**: it cannot be demonstrated by something else: whoever does not have it is not made for philosophy.<sup>45</sup>

The idea is not that whenever I think I am thereby intellectually aware of the existence of myself as a conscious thinking substance, as Descartes originally claimed. Intellectual self-intuition is not the intuition of the self as an object that the understanding immediately represents whenever one thinks about oneself as a thinking subject. To avoid this possible misunderstanding, Fichte added that his intellectual self-intuition "*does not contradict the Kantian sys-*

44 Kant, *Critique*, B157–158. Original emphasis in bold.

45 W. Kabitz, *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fichteschen Wissenschaftslehre aus der Kantischen Philosophie, mit bisher ungedruckten Stücken aus Fichtes Nachlass*, Berlin, Reuther & Reichard, 1902., p. 83.

tem [and that] Kant only rejects a sensible intellectual intuition, and rightly so".<sup>46</sup> Given this, Fichte's idea of intellectual self-intuition is that whenever I think I am thereby intellectually aware of myself as sheer spontaneous agency in thinking.

Now if both Kant and Fichte reject objectifying views of the self, their views in fact concur at least in one fundamental respect. Kant sees the "I" of thinking as a mere logical "I", that is, as an empty vehicle of concepts. Moreover, according to Kant, I am not allowed to claim that I know that I am in essence a spontaneous thinking activity. The underlying nature of the self is a *noumenon*, the unknown thing in itself. In contrast, by claiming that I intellectually self-intuit myself as spontaneous thinking activity, Fichte is holding that the underlying nature or essence of the self is agency in thinking: *Tathandlung*.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, Kant is right (against Descartes) when he claims that I am not allowed to infer from the fact that I think that I am a thinking being, let alone thinking immaterial substance. Now, regardless of whether Kant's notion of noumenon is meaningful or not,<sup>48</sup> Kant is wrong when claims that from the fact that I think, I am allowed to infer only that I am or that I exist. The fact that I become conscious of myself by performing my spontaneous activity in thinking allows me to conclude at the very least that *I am essentially a thinking agency*. Of course, this answer does not settle the dispute between materialism and immaterialism. It is not supposed to be a solution to the traditional mind-body problem in philosophy of mind. Still, Fichte is showing a minimal ontological commitment of the cogito.<sup>49</sup>

Now the idea the "I" originally and transcendently refers to a sheer spontaneous agency in thinking is certainly a first step in solving the puzzle of self-consciousness. At that transcendental level, the puzzle does not arise because there is no need for self-identification in the first place. Transcendental self-knowledge results from the *sui generis* intellectual *Selbstanschauung* that

46 Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nach den Vorlesungen von Hr. Pr. Fichte*, in *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, pt. IV, vol. 2 ed. Reinhard Lauth et al. [Stuttgart Bad-Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978], p. 31.

47 Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nach den Vorlesungen von Hr. Pr. Fichte*, p. 31.

48 As it is well known, Fichte rejects Kant's notion of noumenon or things in itself. The idea that there are "things-in-itself" is a "protestatio facto contraria", as he writes in the first *Transcendental Logic*. We shall not try to do justice to this controversy about Fichte's rejection of Kantian notion of noumenon; for this would require an extended discussion of the secondary literature about the nature of Kant's and Fichte's idealism. That lies far beyond the scope of this paper.

49 That what Bertinetto suggestively calls "performative ontology". Bertinetto: "A ontologia performativa de Fichte." *Aurora*, Curitiba, 2015, p. 802. My translation.

everyone has of oneself as *sheer spontaneous agency in thinking*. The second step required is to account for the knowingly self-reference in empirical self-consciousness. Now the question is: what connects the spontaneous activity in thinking and the finite, embodied individual self? Breazeale provides us with a clue:

Transcendental philosophy is thus an effort to analyze what is in fact the single, synthetic act through which the I posits for itself both itself and its world, thereby becoming aware in a single moment of both its freedom and its limitations, its infinity and its finitude. The result of such an analysis is the recognition that, although “the I simply posits itself,” its freedom is never “absolute” or “unlimited”; instead, freedom proves to be conceivable – and hence the I itself proves to be possible – only as limited and finite. Despite widespread misunderstanding of this point, the **Wissenschaftslehre** is not a theory of the absolute I. Instead, the conclusion of both the Foundation of the Entire **Wissenschaftslehre** and of the **Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo** is that the “absolute I” is a mere abstraction and that the only sort of I that can actually exist or act is a finite, **empirical, embodied, individual self**.<sup>50</sup>

The self as free spontaneous activity *in abstracto* exists *in concreto* as a finite, empirical embodied self. According to Breazeale, the key notion here is Fichte's *Anstoß*, understood as the original limitation of the sheer spontaneity of the I: *The Anstoß thus provides the essential occasion or impetus that first sets in motion the entire complex train of activities that finally result in our conscious experience both of ourselves as empirical individuals and of a world of spatio-temporal material objects.*<sup>51</sup> Concerning the conscious experience of ourselves, Fichte's *Anstoß* gives rise to proprioception, bodily sensations, feeling, and kinesthesia. I am empirically conscious of myself whenever I feel pain, whenever I am standing, whenever I am running, etc. Regarding such empirical self-consciousness, we can use the notion of “self-acquaintance” because what is in question here is something that dispenses with identification. Reference to the embodied self dispenses with any self-identification because it is based on the fundamental metaphysical relation everybody has to their own body, namely identity.

<sup>50</sup> Breazeale, “Johann Gottlieb Fichte”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/johann-fichte/>, pp. 19–20.

<sup>51</sup> Breazeale, “Johann Gottlieb Fichte”, p. 20.

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